Children of the Cross

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Sydney's Kings Cross is not so much overripe as a little on the rancid side. Evidence of long–flourishing rackets – prostitution, gambling, dope – oppress the sense. Only tourists and the young find the Cross consistently alluring.

The children are likely to be those from the poorer western suburbs of Sydney. Unemployed, bored, in search of cheap diversion, they drift up to the Cross. They know people who know people. They make new friends with a place to crash or money for a meal.

To the children, it looks to them like a 24-hour-a-day party. They can be indolent, dead drunk, high on drugs and do nothing but play pool for a few days. As they see it, their new chums at the Cross have merged into a bent society and seem to be getting away with it.

The Cross was always a haven for runaways, strays and jail escapees, and so some of the children start out as day trippers and end up burrowing in with them.

To collect the following data, ELISABETH WYNHAUSEN spent, over a period of a month in January-February, eight afternoons and nights in Kings Cross.

At Club Castello

Club Castello is in Kellett Street, Kings Cross, a grimy back land known in the past for its gambling joints. Itself once a gambling club, Castello's was taken over a few years back by people connected with several of Sydney's gay clubs. Currently the favourite hangout of the children of the Cross, Castello's most regular patronage is likely to be aged between 15 and 19.

It was just after 2 am on a Thursday night. Inside Castello's it was hotter still. The shutters were locked because neighbors complained about the din. The crowd had gone but the air was still blue-grey with smoke, and the jukebox blared the same songs over and over again, with an occasional syncopated rattle as another empty beer can was kicked against a wall.

About a dozen stayers lounged near the pool tables. A boy collapsed on to the beer-soaked carpet and lay there, inert. A friend slapped him awake. A skinny tattooed blond load, 14, sucking on a Tia Maria and milk, pushed 20c pieces into a machine that occasionally spat some back.

Behind the bar was a boy called David. He had started as a bar useful picking cans, glasses and drunks off the floor, and was then promoted. David is 15 (and has, since that night been fired). The

question of an under-age barman serving liquor through most of the night to under-age customers is academic. Castello's has no liquor licence.

Upstairs, in a room with the fake chandelier and tattered wallpaper of former pretension, perhaps a legacy from the gamblers, were two boys at the pool table and a solitary onlooker, another scrawny kid with half-blond hair. His name was Ian, and he said he was 15. He looked younger. Ian ran away from his parent's place in Liverpool, a western suburb of Sydney, nearly a year ago. Since then he has had neither a regular job nor a regular place to stay.

One of his new friends took him to Costello's a few weeks back. Yeah he came in every night. That night he was tipsy but more tired than boozed. He wanted to leave but couldn't yet: the friend he was to travel back to Liverpool with was still working or drinking, or something, downstairs.

He counted his money. He'd spent $31 in two days, he said and had about $6 left, just enough for a half share of a taxi back to Liverpool that night. Yeah, he made the money cracking it. He'd done it a few times in the past week. Yeah with people he met at Castello's.

Downstairs, by 2.30am the same pair were at the pool table again: the same song trumpeted from the jukebox – a number called the Killing of Georgie, about a gay boy bashed to death; the same bored or bombed spectators were still drooped listlessly around the room.

Cathy, 13 and Jenny, 17, had sat there for over an hour, Cathy on Jenny's knee, both of them unsmiling, silent, smoking like somnambulists. They had the perfectly clear irises you see in young children, or kids on dope. That night, like any other, they'd taken three or four Mandrax sleeping pills.

They were at Castello's most nights. "There's nowhere else to go," Jenny said. "I've been in the Cross , on and off, since 1973. I was, uh, 14 then. Mum used to go and shack up with everybody."

Jenny was in State homes until she was eight. In her teens, she was regularly declared to be uncontrollable, or found in possession of dope, and graduated to girls' homes. "So I nicked off and come up to the Cross."

> *"I live with me father now, at Belmore (8 miles south-west of the city). Yeah, I've been cracking it for uh, nine or 10 months. I've got regular customers, six of them. Someone up here was talking about trying it, so I tried it. I'm not a professional prostitute or nothing. When I need the money I crack it.. I hate it, the thought of it makes me feel sick. Sometimes I feel real slack. Sometimes I walk down the street in Belmore, and everybody's talking about me. Yeah, me father knows. He doesn't interfere with my life."*

That evening, Cathy had moved in with Jenny. "It's me mother, she thinks she owns me," Cathy said. Tonight she nagged. That's why I just walked out. I can't live with her, she tells me what to do. Like she thinks she can run me life."

The last time Cathy was in school was 2 1/2 days in May, 1976; "I didn't like it." She wanted a job, she said. "In a factory. I'm too stupid with money to work in a shop or anything like that."

For the past two year, since she was 11, she'd been at the cross most nights; usually until close to sun-up.

Cathy is the third youngest of nine children, Her mother, a pensioner, lives in Leichhardt, an inner-western suburb of Sydney. Her father is dead. A couple of her sisters also go to Castello's.

Cathy and Jenny had paired off a few days before. The fashion now dictates that most kids of the Cross who are not homosexual declare themselves to be bi. Asked about it, Cathy shrugged. "I dunno."

Jenny said "Girls, they don't hurt you. Guys they hurt you. I just don't care for guys no more. I just don't like life. Full stop."

At The Back Bar Of The Crest

From the back bar of the Crest, a hotel near the intersection of Darlinghurst Road and William Street, there was a spectacular Sydney view as the late afternoon sun sharpened up the angles of the city skyline. But on one in the bar looked at it. They had their backs to the light. Midweek at six, the place was more than half empty, with about eight tables occupied. There was a faint odour of stale beer, smoke and vomit.

The Wayout Bar it is called. Petty crims, prostitutes, young toughs and old men – who try for the five dollar pickup – hang out there Apart from that, the bar attracts some of the children because it is easy to score mandies at the crest.

Mandrax are sleeping pills. The children get high by dropping say four to 12 pills then fighting off the effects. Many drink as well, enhancing the buzz. They use mandies because everyone else does; it is within their reach at a dollar a pill and usually available at the Castello's or the back bar of the Crest. The dealers, who presumably obtain the drug on prescription, make a profit of about 900 per cent per pill.

Adam a tall, good-looking boy of 16, was hassling for mandies in the back bar of the Crest that midweek afternoon. Finally, he bought a couple and swallowed them in the washroom of the men's lavatory. Then he jived from one table to the next repeating a rumour that '"the jack's were coming. The policed did not appear but the level of fear remained constant.

At a nearby table, a fat, glassy –eyed girl in a torn shirt was trying to shake into consciousness the boy slumped on the banquette beside her. Adam glanced over at them. He said: "I'm trying to get out of this hole, get out of Castello's. I'm trying to make the Carousel (a Kings Cross nightclub). All the nice places. Get a nice chick, someone good-looking on my arm. Not someone in dirty jeans and tattoos who look like they haven't combed their hair for three years."

Adam had been hustling around the Cross for about 18 months, usually in Castello's or at two of Sydney's best known beats: Fitzroy Gardens, the tourist poster park with the El Alamein Fountain, or in Green Park, in the neighbouring suburb of Darlinghurst. Adam said: "I used to rock

up to Castello's with my board shorts and blond hair… I made heaps when I was younger."

Like many children of the Cross, he'd been in and out of homes, usually for theft, and was due in court again two weeks later. This time the charge was indecent assault. Adam said he had to get a straight job beforehand but he was back the next night and the night after that, still voicing the same plans, the same dreams till caroming form one haunt to the next, still getting gas bombed as he possibly could.

He rang me at 2 am one morning, whacked out of his head, depressed and almost convinced about his intended suicide. But he'd forgotten about the mood by the next afternoon, when he appeared at the Crest. Even sober, Adam half-believed his own hyperbole. He spoke that day of his friend Schoolboy's sugar daddy: a man, he said, who let Schoolboy drive around all day in a white Mercedes, and gave his $750 a week for pocket money.

But if his friend was kept it did not appear to be on that scale: Schoolboy showed up a few minutes later and tried to borrow $2 for Mandrax.

At The Rex

In Fitzroy Gardens at 5.30 on a Thursday afternoon, a young plainclothes clop with a ginger Dennis Lillee Moustache was questioning the one that didn't get away. The other boys on the beat had scurried off down Macleay Street to disappear amongst the crowd in nearby Taproom of the Rex Hotel, about the longest-established homosexual bar in Sydney.

Always busy, the bar is shoulder-to-shoulder at night. Some kids hang out there in the afternoon, then drift off to the Crest and later, Castello's. A few stay at the Rex. They said the other scenes were too squalid for them.

Ricky, 17, was one. He was at the Rex on a Friday afternoon with an older friend, a businessman who had swapped his grey suit for a stars and stripes T-shirt. Ricky, a slight, pale youth said:" I sleep most of the day, then I rock up here and find out where the action is."

Ricky was kicked out by his father when he was 15. He went to Brisbane for a while and then came to live in the Cross about two year s ago. "I started cracking it every night to stay here. For a while I was living with a guy who was 55. He paid the rent with his dole cheque. No, I didn't really like him. It was mainly security."

> *"The first time I got off with a guy I was 12. It was only a dollar in those days. I suddenly realised the other day that I'd been cracking it for nearly six years. I wasn't' meant to crack it, no one was meant to crack it. I just want the better things in life. But I never seem to catch up. I just seem to crack it to survive and keep going. I could make anything up to $100 a night – with four guys – but usually I just make $20. Most of what I make I spend on alcohol."*

“I got into dope because my life was already screwed: my mind is screwed right up. I didn't know which direction I was heading in. So I take dope and forget the day-to-day problems. I ripped windows out and stuff like that, on mandies. I started out getting a habit on speed. I couldn’t sleep. I got cramps. But I wanted to have fun, enjoy myself. The routine was getting to me.”

Ricky was not on the dole and hadn’t applied. Occasionally, he said, he did some dealing in grass and hash “I’m really not really looking for a job. Money is too easy to come by.” He had money on him but Ricky did not buy drinks or smokes: he cadged them from his friend, or when that failed, from me. Stars and Stripes ticked him off about it: Ricky was amused. That was part of the game. A hustle here and a hustle there…

“All I seem to do,“ Ricky said, “ is drink and try to find a good time and find somewhere new…”

AT TINA’S

Somewhere new: their latest find is Tina’s at the top of William street, a gay bar recently incarnated on the site of the Laramie restaurant. Tina’s came as a surprise. It was a clean, almost well lighted place. Tina, a drag queen who worked for three years as a barmaid in the Taproom of the Rex was intent on keeping it that way. She seemed a bit concerned that the kids would lower the tone of the place.

Late at night the bar had a chummy ambience with the clientele, many in their middle years, gathered around the piano for a singalong. The kids were out the back, on the dance-floor and huddled around the jukebox, playing agin and again the same records they’d played at Castello’s and the Crest.

“Everyone comes to Tina’s now,” said Bianca, 15, hitching at the stocking under his Fiorucci jeans. Bianca was new to the Cross and not yet jaded. But he did have a problem: “I want to crack it in the Cross, pay protection but I’m too scared.”

Some weeks before, he was arrested while soliciting, charged with offensive behavior and fined $200. “If I can’t pay up, I’ll go to jail.” So he was on the dole, receiving $87 a fortnight after convincing the authorities that he was 20 years old and said his fine would have to paid out of the dole money.

Bianca ran away from home when he was 11, after being expelled from school. About a year ago, he decided he was “transsexual”. At that time, Bianca was a pretty 14 year-od boy who looked older, and worked as a prostitute in a Melbourne massage parlour. Since then, he said, “I’ve lived as a woman. I went with a guy for nine weeks. He didn’t know. I paid a lot of money to learn how to do trick sex (so sexual partners will be convinced they are with a woman, not a man).

“I used to put on a voice like a girl, but it hurts my throat too much. I’m going to have my vocal chords done. I’ve heard about it from other queens. I take hormones – I’m waiting til my breasts get bigger do stripping.”

“I shave my whole body every morning, my arms, my legs, my feet, my chest. I shave my face three times a day. The rest of the day I come to the Rex, I go to the Crest, I clean up my flat. I keep myself busy, do me hair, do me make-up, wipe it off again.”

Bianca claimed to have worked exceptionally long hours at the massage parlour in order to save money for a sex change operation. He left Melbourne some months back, told his parents he had a two –year modeling contract in Israel (“it was the furthest place I could think of “) and came to the Cross.

Released from Long Bay on a Wednesday morning, John was in the Taproom of the Rex Hotel that night, swaggering from one clutch of young acquaintances to another, with messages from inside and tales of his own daring. He had been in prison for a month, after failing to pay fines on a possession charge. On his release, he was handed back the $40 odd he had when he went in, and immediately spent $35 of it for a tattoo on his upper arm which said with scrolls, hearts and flowers; “Joylene Rose of my Heart.”

Joylene, a wan, nervy blonde of 17, had the name of a former boyfriends’ gang tattooed over her breasts, and the name of another ex on her arm. She had scrubbed so hard at the marking on her arm that several layers of skin, but not the tattoo, had come off.

Joylene and John planned go to Melbourne the next day. She said “I reckon we’ll stay together for a long time otherwise he wouldn’t have got my name tattooed eh, for $35.” We’ll be together forever,” says John.

As it turned out they didn’t not go to Melbourne together the next day, nor the one after, and I did not see them together again,.

Like most of her companions, Joylene kept talking about getting out of the Cross: ”But I’ve got nowhere else to go.” She’d been there, on and off, since she was 14. At that age Joylene fell pregnant and left school to have the child. Sometimes she stayed at her parent’s house, on the western fringe of Sydney, and worked at conventional jobs. But she said that her parents did not really want her around. There ware 15 children in Joylene’s family; three died in infancy and one died in a childhood accident. Her father, a tradesman, was no longer working she said. He’d been partly paralysed in an accident.

The Children And Their Parents

The children of the Cross are mostly from large families where child care is likely to be casual, accidents common, contact with the authorities frequent, and mortality relatively high.

Joylene had two children: the second was born when she was 16. Last year, the three-year-old died in a car accident. The baby smothered and died while being minded by a friend.

There were other stories as grim. The children of the Cross, for the most part, appeared to have been ignored, neglected, bashed or otherwise abused by their parents. In some cases, the parents

had not cared to exert control. On others, they were apparently unable to. But some of the children were inclined to exaggerate their domestic horror stories.

The children inflated the number of times they had been in homes and embroidered the accounts of own social deviance. Joylene told how the girl she assaulted (supposedly using Tai Kwon Do) when aged 14 was in hospital for nine months. John said he was around the Cross, sleeping on park benches and drinking plonk, when he was eight years old. Adam said he was first on the beat when he was 13, then changed the story a few times.

Like nearly all adolescents, these children had a cloudy sense of identity. So they stressed the passive misery of their family backgrounds and magnified their own active transgressions. If they couldn't be "good", they'd be "bad" with a vengeance. Even if half the stories had to be made up.

There was another side of this fantasy life. Like Bianca's glamorous vision of gender transformation.

These dreams at least survive until the next booze-up or the next night o the next rent-day. It is the one weird element of stability amid the turmoil of their lives. Little in their real world was predictable. The next customer could refuse to pay, and beat them up. The friend who promised them some money disappeared. The police suddenly started hassling them.

The Children And Violence

There is a true story, told to me by an older person who is not part of the scene but happens to know some of the children. He said that one night last year three casual circus workers came to Castello's. They didn't have anywhere to stay so one of the club regulars, a 19-year-old who had his own flat, said they could crash at his place. The next morning, this boy went out early, looking for work. When he returned, the three men had gone, taking with them his stereo, records clothes and a little money he had saved.

He mentioned this to his friends at Castello's. Within 10 days the circus workers were located (a drag queen from another club knew one of them) and heavied. They returned or made good the stuff stolen.

This protective network comes at a price. The children of the cross conform, or they look out for themselves. A boy who moved in with the Castello's crowd but always refused to crack it, would be treated like an outsider, socially excluded or bashed.

Virtually all of them signed on indelibly as members of an outrageous subculture. Girls as well as boys had themselves tattooed. It seemed to be a bit of a carry over from the days when they were all sharpies. Tattoos make police identification much easier. For the kids this is less significant than showing that they belong and proving that they have the macho toughness that they demand from teach other, irrespective or sex or sexual orientation.

Casual violence is a fact of life in Kings Cross. Casual violence is a fact of life in the homes of the children cam from, and the homes they are sentenced to. David, a brawny 16-year-old who usually hung out in the Rex, was in a boys' home not long ago on a charge of assault. He said: "We bashed up a couple of blokes who called us poofters."

> *"I've got a heavy if I want one," said Ricky, the slight pale boy in the Rex, "When I was 15 a guy raped me. He showed up here last week. I had him bashed. It happened here (the Rex) in the toilets."*

At Castell's on night a youth called Max revealed with pride that he'd recently broken a jukebox by smashing a boy's head against it during a fight. Max billed himself as a poofter-basher, but was often at Castello's and, according to other boys, cracked it.

Max did have the swollen knuckles, the knife and bottle scars and steel plate in his head (from a fight with surfies and a surfboard): wounds of the street fighter. He slurred and spoke with difficulty, like a paunchy boxer. He'd been going with his girlfriend Christine for five years, since they were 12. She'd had a baby four months earlier. Max said he came home recently to find a to tattoo the baby's arm. "I jobbed him, I was gonna throw out outa the (first floor) window but Christine stopped me."

Max was inarticulate, illiterate and unskilled. He didn't have a lot to fight back with other than his fists. Like all the children in the Cross, he was continual prey to adults with power.

A boy of 16 who was scared of giving tot many details said he had to pay $20 a week, and preferably $30 to a madam for protection. He paid it out of his dole money.

The kids rapidly found out that older people in the scene who offered friendship, shelter or money usually wanted something for it: sex, most predictably.

Wherever they go in the Cross, the children go on sufferance. Nowhere was this more apparent than in Castello's , closest thing to their own club. Those flagrantly under age who always reject the advances of certain older men around the place may find it difficult to gain entrée after a while. A boy who started a fight there (and many do) risks a bashing. Any kids who seem really smashed are turfed out. They can be based first. It is expected that most in Castello's whether children or adult customers, will have reason to conform to management codes.

The Children And The Police

In none other of the children's haunts was the law so omnipresent. The police raid Castello's about once a month. According to children who were around Castello's on several such occasions, the police rounded up a number of people in the place, took them to Darlinghurst Police Station about a kilometre away, and charged them with drinking in an unlicensed club.

When I rang Darlighurst Police Station about the dates of these raids, Detective-Sergeant David Leach, head of the detectives said: "I can't

give you those. I wouldn’t know.” He pointed out that other squads of police such as the 21 Dvision, or the Drug or Vice Squads also raided Castello’s.

These raids apart, police show up at Castello’s virtually every night. Each time I was there, a couple of plainclothesmen form he CIB’s Consorting Squad dropped in, noted down some kids’ names and ages, then left. One of them told me they came to see out jail escapees.

Some kids actually carried around driving licenses or birth certificates, not necessarily their own. One evening as the Consorting Squad came up the stairs, a girl standing nearby whipped a Band-aid out of her handbag and pasted it over the tattoo on her arm.

Virtually all the kids of the Cross felt vulnerable. Either they were under age or drunk or drugged or involved in minor larceny, dealing or prostitution. In the unlikely even that they were clean, they could go on a consorting charge.

One night at Tina’s a boy of 18 called Robert rushed in, distraught over several encounters with the police. Like many of the kids Robert peroxided his hair and wore and earring in one pierced ear. He also got onto drag occasionally, but was in jeans that night. He said: ”the Jacks just told me they’d get me for vagrancy if I didn’t get out of the Cross. I can’t work in the park tonight because it’s going to be raided. How do I pay tomorrow’s rent? All they want is to get rid of all the kids in the Cross.”

> *“I can’t stand it any more. The other night I was in drag, they got me for drunk, there me in the van and then in a cell by myself, I screamed out for water for half an hour. They wouldn't get me any. Then another cop came on duty. He’s camp. They told him not to give me any water but he did. He was a good guy. He treated me good. He came in a he screwed me. I didn’t mind. I let him because he was a good guy.”*

Because of its seeming improbability, I pressed him on the veracity of this four different times. He insisted that it was true, but didn't think it was very important.

Sometimes it’s easy to tell when they’re lying some sometimes it isn’t.

A few nights later, on a Saturday, Robert turned up at the Crest. He was about to leave the Cross, he said His brother was sending him to New Zealand on the grounds that his homosexuality was an embarrassment to the family. “My father always said Id turn out to be a poof, so I did.”

> *“I have a good time Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday…every night is Saturday night to me,” said David, the brawny 16-year-old from the Rex. David was one of only a handful of the children who seemed positive about the life they were leading. He planned to stay in the Cross until he turned 21. And then, said David, who donned a pair of girl’s slacks and cracked it “every night of the week,” He’d get married, find a straight job, settle down. ”I want to be a hairdresser.”*

Getting Out

For many, the ultimate ambition was to achieve some kind of suburban ordinariness. The kids who'd had enough of the life shunted between hyperactive planning, illusory ideals and a hopeless defeatism. Susan, a pert, talkative 17-year-old who made it to the Rex sometimes in the late afternoon and was in Castello's every night after 11 said: "When you live in the Cross you wake up, have a smoke, eat rubbish. I really hate the place. When I started taking mandies I was feeling real bad, not sleeping, not eating the right foods. Every time I've been mandied I've got tattooed.

Susan said she used to drop ten or 12 mandies a night. "Used to" meant a week before.

Susan was in and out of girl's homes, in and out of the Cross, throughout her adolescence. Then she went to live with her parents, only to leave soon afterwards with a boyfriend who had since been jailed. "I didn't understand things then as good as I do now. I wont go back home, but I feel guilty for leaving home and all the trouble I've caused. I'm going to get a nice flat near Cabramatta" (close to her parents' suburb).

Literally moments later, Susan mentioned her other boyfriend, a sailor, who would marry her, she said in April. "We were going to get engaged last Thursday but he bailed me out that day," Susan had spent four days in the cells after being arrested on a "snow-dropping" (theft from a clothes lines) charge.

She explained that she lived with an older girl, a prostitute who had already been sent to the women's prison on the same offence. "I told my mother I was going with Julie, she reckoned it was good in a way. Oh, how can I explain it? She thinks I wont get pregnant."

Then Susan reverted to the dream of her April marriage, and the babies she wanted to have. "It's my ambition now to get a job. You can't live like this."

Some kids found that they could. Or that it didn't matter any more. On Saturday night, in the back bar of the Crest, the stale smell was more pronounced. By nine the place had filled up. Pam, a peroxided blond of 16 or 17 who would have ben pretty except that all of her front teeth were missing, came up, perched on the edge of my chair and asked for money.

That night, as always, Pam had dropped about 12 Mandrax. Several times she toppled sideways off the arm of the vinyl chair, cracked her head against the chair behind and got up again.

The rumour that I was from the police had started a day earlier. By Saturday all the kids had heard it. It was making interviewing difficult and making me uncomfortable. Later that night I met a friend at Castello's, a gay who had first taken me there and joined me on several nights when I was researching this story. I told him the kids thought I was a cop. He said, and he meant it, "You are a cop."

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